Lenape Farming and Agriculture

The Lenape lived in settled villages and did not stay in one place for the length of their lives. Every ten or twelve years they had to move their entire village to a new site because they had used up many of the natural resources of their area.

Women were responsible for the planting and harvesting of crops and gathering of wild foods, for preparing meals and caring for the children. They were skilled at making clay pots, weaving rush mats and bags, and making baskets. They wove cornhusks for slippers, mats and dolls, and made containers from elm and birch bark. With fibers from the inside of plants, they spun and braided cords for binding and carrying bundles. Women were also responsible for preparing the animal hides used for clothes and shelters. With bone tools, they scraped the hair from the hides and cleaned them. Then they smoked them, cut them into pieces and sewed the pieces with bone needles.

Men prepared land for gardening. They hunted and fished, traded with other groups, and made tools. They were good woodworkers, and made bows, arrows, fishing equipment, canoes, bowls, and ladles. Some warriors used their woodworking skills to make ball-headed clubs.

Many of the Lenape lived in villages for most of the year and grew much of their food. The three most important crops were corn, beans, and squash, known as "the three sisters." The gardening tools were very simple—hoes, and sticks for digging and planting. Some of the crop was eaten as soon as it was harvested, but much of it was preserved for use in winter when food was scarce. What was kept for later use was dried and stored in underground pits lined with bark.

The Lenape fished and hunted in all seasons. Using bows and arrows, traps, snares, and spears, they hunted deer, bear, elk and beaver. They also hunted the ducks and other birds that lived in their area. Sometimes hunting and fishing trips took men away from their villages for several weeks. Wild foods were also used. Berries were eaten fresh, baked into bread made from corn flour, or dried for winter use. Nuts were ground up and baked, or were pressed to squeeze out their oil, which was used in cooking. Maple syrup was made by collecting sap from maple trees in early spring.